

October 29, 2005

Script for *Fabulous Furry Tales* podcast #3

Welcome to *Altivo's Fabulous Furry Tales*, a discussion of furry literature and related arts, presented every week or two. I'm your host, Altivo, the Clydesdale librarian.

That little introductory melody was from *The Banks of Green Willow*, composed in 1913 by George Butterworth, an English composer whose abilities were still increasing when his life was cut short in World War I. The sample is from a performance by the English String Orchestra, conducted by William Boughton and available in its entirety on Nimbus Records. I thought it particularly appropriate as a context for this week's subject, since Kenneth Grahame's masterpiece was published only five years earlier, and was the last major work of his own creative lifetime.

And that should frame my topic nicely:

Kenneth Grahame and The Wind in the Willows

Kenneth Grahame was born in 1859 at Edinburgh, Scotland. Little was known of his life until well after it ended, but in recent years he has had several excellent biographers so I'll mention only a few highlights. His mother died of scarlet fever when he was four years old, and his father, apparently unable to recover from grief, handed their four children over to the care of their maternal grandmother who took them to live at Cookham Dene on the River Thames, in Berkshire. Grahame did not, it seems, form any particular attachment to his grandmother, but he was allowed to run freely about the countryside and the riverbank, and those idyllic years until he was sent away to school at St. Edward's in Oxford remained the ideal that he sought to recapture for much of the rest of his life. The Berkshire countryside and the River Thames of the open country surface again and again in his writings, always in the favorable light of a golden age.

Once enrolled at St. Edward's, young Kenneth excelled in both his studies and the expected athletics. By the time he graduated, he had reached the rank of head boy of the school. However, his hope of attending university at Oxford was dashed when his paternal uncle, who had underwritten the cost of St. Edward's, decided that it was time for Kenneth to work for a living. He was put in line for a clerkship at the Bank of England, and set to work at his uncle's firm while awaiting an opening in Threadneedle Street. That opening did come, sooner rather than later, and Grahame's career eventually propelled him to the position of secretary of the bank, from which he retired in 1908.

English bankers in those days really did keep banker's hours, punctuated by long lunches at which socializing and drinking were the norm. Grahame eventually met a number of influential persons in academe and publishing, including F. J. Furnivall, the founder of the Early English Text Society. Furnivall encouraged him to write, which he proceeded to do.

Grahame's early works, largely essays and short fiction, are not widely known today. Those that were published in book form—*Pagan Papers*, *The Golden Age*, *Dream Days*, and *The Headswoman*—are readily available now in Project Gutenberg on the world wide web. These early works are interesting reading in themselves, and they point toward or even foreshadow the apex of the author's literary career in *The Wind in the Willows*, though only the story of "The Reluctant Dragon" included in *Dream Days* actually resembles it to any extent.

Indeed, much like J. M. Barrie's "Lost Boys" or his own Riverbank bachelors, Grahame seems never to have quite grown up, and to have been subject to enthusiasms not entirely unlike those of Toad himself, who proclaimed upon the merits of his latest interest always as if it were the last and only thing a gentleman should want. Here, for instance, Toad discourses on the merits of his newly-acquired canary yellow gypsy cart:

"'All complete!' said the Toad triumphantly, pulling open a locker. 'You see—biscuits, potted lobster, sardines—everything you can possibly want. Soda-water here—baccy there—letter-paper, bacon, jam, cards and dominoes—you'll find,' he continued, as they descended the steps again, 'you'll find that nothing what ever has been forgotten, when we make our start this afternoon.'

"'I beg your pardon,' said the Rat slowly, as he chewed a straw, 'but did I overhear you say something about "WE," and "START," and "THIS AFTERNOON?"'

"'Now, you dear good old Ratty,' said Toad, imploringly, 'don't begin talking in that stiff and sniffy sort of way, because you know you've GOT to come. I can't possibly manage without you, so please consider it settled and don't argue—it's the one thing I can't stand. You surely don't mean to stick to your dull fusty old river all your life and just live in a hole in a bank, and BOAT? I want to show you the world! I'm going to make an ANIMAL of you, my boy!'"

Some have remarked that Grahame's preferred bachelor life is thoroughly reflected by the near total absence of female characters in this book. Actually, there are only two, the gaoler's daughter who helps Toad escape from prison, and the barge woman whose horse Toad ultimately steals, adding injury after insulting her:

"'You common, low, FAT barge-woman!' he shouted; 'don't you dare to talk to your betters like that! Washerwoman indeed! I would have you to know that I am a Toad, a very well-known, respected, distinguished Toad! I may be under a bit of a cloud at present, but I will NOT be laughed at by a barge-woman.'

“The woman moved nearer to him and peered under his bonnet keenly and closely. ‘Why, so you are!’ she cried. ‘Well, I never! A horrid, nasty, crawly Toad! And in my nice clean barge too! Now that is a thing that I will NOT have.’

“She relinquished the tiller for a moment. One big mottled arm shot out and caught Toad by a fore-leg, while the other gripped him fast by a hind-leg. Then the world turned suddenly upside down, the barge seemed to flit lightly across the sky, the wind whistled in his ears, and Toad found himself flying through the air, revolving rapidly as he went.”

There has been much discussion as to whether this truly reflects Grahame’s relationships with women, such as they were. He married late, at age 41. He had only one child, a son named Alastair, who was born within a year of the marriage date. There is no evidence that Grahame was ever on particularly bad terms with his wife, Elspeth Thomson, but likewise no evidence of any great or lasting love affair between them. Alastair, who was a sickly boy, was raised largely in isolation as Grahame himself had been, hearing from his absent father in the form of letters that contained some of the very tales that eventually became *The Wind in the Willows*.

But it is not only the life of Toad himself that sometimes reflects Grahame’s own experiences. The Rat, the Mole, and even the Badger seem at times to represent Grahame at points in his own life. And the lyrical descriptions of the English countryside surely tell exactly how Grahame himself felt about it, as in this wintry scene:

“The sheep ran huddling together against the hurdles, blowing out thin nostrils and stamping with delicate fore-feet, their heads thrown back and a light steam rising from the crowded sheep-pen into the frosty air, as the two animals hastened by in high spirits, with much chatter and laughter. They were returning across country after a long day’s outing with Otter, hunting and exploring on the wide uplands where certain streams tributary to their own River had their first small beginnings; and the shades of the short winter day were closing in on them, and they had still some distance to go. Plodding at random across the plough, they had heard the sheep and had made for them; and now, leading from the sheep-pen, they found a beaten track that made walking a lighter business, and responded, moreover, to that small inquiring something which all animals carry inside them, saying unmistakeably, ‘Yes, quite right; THIS leads home!’”

I think it clear that this masterwork, *The Wind in the Willows*, arose not only from a retiring gentleman’s desire to amuse his son, but from his need to express his own yearnings to return to the happier days of his childhood, when he wandered unrestrained over the open countryside, with what companions he chose, and doing whatever they agreed upon.

In any case, the book only saw the booksellers’ displays after a long effort. Grahame pulled various bits and stories together at the behest of the American

publisher of *Everybody's Magazine*. When the manuscript was complete, however, they rejected it. Likewise, Grahame's own prior publisher, John Lane of the Bodley Head, refused it. The author sent a copy to a friend and correspondent, Theodore Roosevelt, who also did not care for it, finding the idea of animals talking and strutting about like men somehow offensive. However, and fortunately for us all, Roosevelt's wife and son loved the book and eventually persuaded him to change his opinion. He encouraged Scribner's to publish it, which they finally did, though reluctantly. The firm of Methuen in England then did the same.

Most literary critics disliked the work intensely. They had no context in which to place or evaluate it, never having seen anything like it before. It wasn't clear whether the audience was to be children or adults. Some did not care for the impunity with which Toad pulled off most of his adventures. Grahame's animal characters, though they walked and talked as humans, were not quite human. They indulged in the normal behaviors of their species, such as ready and eager swimming on the part of the Water Rat and the Otter, and near hibernation on the part of the Badger. It wasn't a fable that used animals merely to represent characteristics of humans. Likewise, it wasn't a natural tale in which the animals were able to talk but were entirely animal. Who ever heard of a toad stealing a motor car instead of being squashed flat by one? Neither was it a story entirely and solely for children, like Beatrix Potter's immensely popular series of illustrated tales. This book was built of dense prose that could be read on many levels and degrees of complexity. Grahame had invented modern anthropomorphic characters, in fact, and was the first notable author to use them.

He was successful, too. As often happens, the reading public didn't care a fig for what the critics thought, and took to *The Wind in the Willows* enthusiastically. In the 97 years since it first appeared, the book has never been out of print. It has been translated, retold, turned into play form by none other than A. A. Milne (the creator of Winnie-the-Pooh,) and presented as an animated tale by multiple film makers including Walt Disney. It is required reading for every fan of furry characters in either prose or graphic format, and contains some of the finest classical English prose of the 20th century, the equal of Tolkien or Fitzgerald. If you haven't experienced it, I can only say that you should do so without delay.

I'm at the end of my allotted time, but I do want to mention some mail again. In response to last week's discussion of *The Call of the Wild*, a US listener writes:

"I suppose Jack London would have enjoyed having an internet connection. He'd have found a large audience for his ability to be wolf and identify with the actual animal in ways that only now, nearly a hundred years later, have become a rather common thing online.

"Do you think that stories about animals that think, 'furries', are still relegated, as has been for the last

century or more, to the role of children's stories, or have they become, with the internet, more adult fare?"

I agree that Jack London might have indulged in the internet, offering as it does an opportunity for social interaction without physical proximity. As for the question of whether animal stories are still treated strictly as children's materials or are considered suitable for adults, I think the jury remains undecided. As a librarian, I see evidence almost daily suggesting that many people still believe that all animated features with animal characters and all books with anthropomorphic characters are intended and suited for children only. In fact, this prejudice is probably at the root of the dislike some folks have for furry fandom and furies in general. Nonetheless, there is a growing population of adults, typified by the listeners who have responded to these podcasts, who are not afraid to admit their enjoyment of and even identification with these works. It is clear that writers like Jack London and Kenneth Grahame did not intend their work exclusively for the young reader; and as the saying goes, "The truth shall make us free."

That brings me to the conclusion of this week's discussion. Thanks for listening, and let me once more encourage you to contribute your thoughts and suggestions. You can send your e-mail to [altivo at livejournal dot com](mailto:altivo@livejournal.com). Until next time then, good reading to all.

Fine print: This podcast is freely distributable for non-commercial use only, provided it is credited appropriately.